

Session 1: How many people died in the Great Fire?

Speakers: Neil Hanson, author, and Gustav Milne, University College London

Neil Hanson

Good morning. I'd like to say first of all that the 'True Story of the Fire of London' was my publisher's idea, not mine. I'm aware there are a number of 'true stories' about the Fire of London and with luck we may find one or two today.

Now a fire needs three things. It needs a spark to ignite it, and fuel and oxygen to feed it. In the late summer of 1666 London had been the subject of a ten-month drought. There were very few stone and brick buildings in London as I'm sure you know. Almost all of them were timber framed; either walled with mud and a mixture of chopped straw or animal hair or with wooded boards coated with pitch to weather proof them. The wharfs and warehouses were stacked high with wood and coal, fuel for the coming winter, textiles, tobacco, sugar, brandy, gunpowder, tallow, fats and just about every other combustible material known to 17th-century man. The fuel was already in place. A fierce easterly gale springing up provided the oxygen. All that was then needed was a spark, and as you've heard, on the 2nd September 1666, London erupted. The fires burned for four days and four nights, and by the time they were extinguished, 2000 Londoners were sleeping under the stars in Moorfields. The rising sun that fifth morning, when the fire had been put out, was casting light on ground that had been shaded since before the Norman Conquest. Medieval London had virtually ceased to exist and in its place was a wasteland of rubble and ashes, so devoid of buildings, so empty and featureless, that to one stupefied onlooker it seemed like the Cumbrian fells. 'But there's nothing to be seen' he said, 'but heaps of stones.'

When I first began toying with idea of writing a book on the Great Fire of London I had to pause and think very hard about it. After all, it's just what the world needs isn't it, another book about the most exhaustively documented event in British history. But two things did spur me on, and one is that despite the millions of words that have been written about the Fire of London, the most intriguing questions about it still remain unanswered. Who or what caused it will be touched on later today, but the death toll from the Fire of London is something that particularly intrigued me. The other reason for going ahead with it was because I felt I could offer a new approach to the subject, combining original research with heart rending original witness accounts of the fire, the title of my book, the Dreadful Judgment, is a quote from the aforementioned Thomas Vincent, with modern physics and arson investigation.

I learnt much from accounts of other great fire disasters, the destruction of Moscow in 1570, the great fire of Chicago in 1871, 20th-century infernos like the London Blitz, Dresden, Hamburg, Kings Cross underground and Bradford City football stadium fires, and the fire that destroyed the medieval Tangle House in Hampshire in the year 2000. I then spoke to modern experts in every conceivable relevant field, police and fire officers, ambulance men, forensic scientists, archaeologists, psychologists, even a crematorium

technician. What they told, particularly those who had been involved in the aftermath of contemporary disasters, helped me to understand the mental states and behaviour patterns of people who had witnessed disastrous events like great fires, those who ignite them, and those who confess, not always truthfully, to having done so. They helped me to understand the values and limitations of eye witness testimony. How people, through no sinister motive, can often see the same event in radically different ways. These discussions also taught me the inestimable value of first hand experience. Based on his lifetimes work for example, the crematorium technician told me things that flatly contradicted the textbooks used by arson investigators. These claim that even in quite intense fires, the back teeth will often be preserved, protected by the denser bones of the skull. When I told the crematorium technician that, he just shrugged his shoulders. 'I've been doing this job 25 years', he said, 'I've never found a tooth yet.' And when I told the UK's leading expert in the psychology of arsonists that the man hanged for igniting the fire of London had voluntarily confessed his crime, his only comment was 'well that's something of a first. I've never met one who did.'

These wider researches help to explain some of the more curious occurrences of the Great Fire. When St Paul's was cleared after the blaze, a body was found in the broken tomb of a knight buried 300 years before. It was in a remarkable state of preservation, wholeness of skin, with hair still upon the head as a witness described it, and its condition was hailed as proof of the sanctity of the long dead knight. Two other similarly mummified bodies were found elsewhere in St Paul's. Yet when I was reading an account of the firebombing of Dresden I came across the description of a body found in a cellar that matched in every particular the one found in St Paul's. And it at once seemed to me to be more likely that the body found in that tomb wasn't the body of the long dead knight, but some terrified victim of the fire, who'd crept into the broken tomb and had been asphyxiated by the smoke and fumes, and baked by the searing heat of the fire overhead until his body was completely mummified.

When the fire broke out, it first raged through the poorer districts along the riverside, where tens of thousands of people lived cheek by jowl. I think it's hard for us to understand the densities that people lived at at that time. A single modest house in Dowgate ward for example, was home to eleven couples and fifteen single people. A ten-room house in Silver Street was home to ten families, most of whom had also taken in lodgers, separated from them by a curtain or piece of wood, or perhaps even sharing the same room. And four once fine mansions down by the riverside had been divided and subdivided and subdivided again into tenements housing the staggering total of 8000 people. And even these were probably far from the worst examples of over-crowding. Alsatia was only the most notorious of a number of criminal sanctuaries where colonies of the poor and dispossessed lived amongst thieves, debtors, robbers, soaks and harlots. In the whole of Alsatia there were only two lanes wide enough for even a cart to enter, for the rest access was by passageways barely wide enough for two men to pass. These opened into closed courtyards which led off even narrower passageways and rickety staircases. As I said the fire burnt through this district first of all. Only later did

it climb into the hills into the heart of the city and destroy the houses where the better off citizens lived aloof from the stink of the river. They had time to save themselves and perhaps a few of their possessions. The poor had little or none. And it became my firm conviction that many of these poor people, the very old, the very young, the sick, the lame, the dead drunk (the fire broke out on the Saturday night and human nature doesn't change, whatever else does) the unlucky, the unwary, or those who simply lingered too long trying to save possessions, would have been trapped, asphyxiated and burned. But if I was going to advance that theory I would have two problems to solve. The first was, why were their deaths not recorded, and the second was what became of their bodies.

In the aftermath of the Great Fire, many, many Londoners left the city forever. A census taken in 1673, a full seven years after the fire, showed that 3500 rebuilt homes were still standing empty for want of people to occupy them, and 100,000 Londoners, somewhere between a quarter and a third of the pre-fire population, had never returned. Now of course many of these had simply moved to the suburbs, many more had set up as tradesmen in other towns and cities around the country, and many more had emigrated. A party of 30 burned Londoners, as they were described, even settled on the lonely Atlantic island of St Helena. But tens of thousands of Londoners remained unaccounted for, and in the daily struggle for survival amid the ruins of the city, few I think would have had time to stop and wonder what had happened to former friends, neighbours and acquaintances. When even families were either permanently split up or spent months or years trying to find traces of missing relatives. Often the only proof that a member of a family had survived would be some memento too valueless to be stolen by the gangs of thieves prowling the ruins. Perhaps a scrap of a favourite dress fabric or a piece of ribbon pinned to a stake embedded in the rubble that had once been their home. If property owners had disappeared or failed to return then obviously their absence would be noted and commentated upon. If nothing else, somebody would have wanted their land and their property. But the fate of the great mass of landless, homeless poor was of minimal concern to anyone.

Many, including the King's paymaster of works, pronounced themselves delighted that the fires had cauterized the slums and tenements and criminal sanctuaries, breeding grounds for the plague and sources of festering discontent with the profligacy of the crown. If the occupants had also died, so much the better. But if so, what had become of their bodies? Well, the crematorium technician I mentioned earlier inadvertently gave me the key to solving this particular mystery, to my own satisfaction, but probably not to Gustav's at least. What he told me offered a compelling reason why the official death total of half a dozen could have so grossly underestimated what I believe to be the reality. It takes 80 to 100 minutes at a temperature of 750 degrees Celsius to reduce the average human body to a pile of ash and a few scraps of the larger bones, the skull. No more than an inch or two across, they look to me more like limestone or driftwood than bone, and they crumble to powder in your fingers. Any disturbance of them causes them to break down into ash. Indeed modern fire officers are taught not to train hoses on burning bodies because they will disintegrate beyond recognition. The bodies of small

people and children are usually completely consumed in a fire, with not even a trace of bone remaining. Even when the fire front has moved on and the heat source has been removed, bodies will continue to burn, using the fat stored within the body as fuel. So even if the fire of London had swept through in no time at all, once the bodies had been heated to a certain temperature and started to burn they would continue to burn, and bodies have been completely consumed in this way, even in quite modest modern house fires. The Fire of London was far from modest. It raged over four days with great intensity, and even six months after the blaze Samuel Pepys was recording smoke still rising from smouldering cellars. And the heat it generated was unbelievably intense. It was hot enough to melt lead and glass, gold and silver and even iron and steel. Bodies burned six feet under in their graves. Now depending on its purity, iron melts at a temperature of between 1100 and 1650 degrees Celsius, steel between 1250 and 1480 degrees. The Fire of London was hot enough not just to melt the great lead roof of St Paul's, six acres in extent, they melted the chains of the City gates, they melted the steel on the wharfs, and even the great iron bars of Newgate gaol, as thick as my wrist, all melted in the heat.

There were no banks in Restoration London. People kept their wealth in gold and silver coin and plate, stored in strong boxes in their houses. When the survivors of the fire made frantic searches for the melted remnants of their wealth, in competition with the gangs of thieves who were mining the ruins for whatever they could find, who would have paused to consider a few scraps that might as easily have been animal bone, burnt wood or calcined stone? They would have been tossed aside without a second glance. And when the reconstruction of London began, tens of thousands of rubble and ash were moved without thought of what they might contain. The Embankment fronting the river, the entire length of Thames Street parallel to it, the lower ends of all the steep streets climbing the hills into the City, were all raised by several feet using this material. Thousands of tons more were simply dumped on islands in the Thames. Monkey Island at Bray for example, was raised by six feet by using this material, and it's my belief that amongst this material lay unrecognised the last remains of the unknown victims of the Fire of London.

The terrible events of 9/11 in Manhattan offer their own corroboration and confirmation of this. Those whose grim task it was to search the rubble for the remains of the 2749 people known to have died in the twin towers knew within reasonably well defined boundaries where they were looking. They had unprecedented resources of manpower and financial, technical and scientific resources to back them. Yet despite all that and despite a finger tip search of the mountains of debris, despite all the advances in DNA and forensics, enabling scientists to identify a body from the smallest scrap of human bone and tissue, 49 percent of the victims of 9/11 have vanished without trace, and of the remainder who have been identified, the vast majority were not identified through any human trace but through personal possessions found amongst the rubble. If that was the case in a 21st-century disaster, with all the resources that we can bring to bear on it, how much more difficult would it have been to track and identify victims of a 17th-century disaster?

So my firm contention is that the Great Fire of London was responsible not for the deaths of four or six or eight people as has been claimed over the years, but hundreds and possibly even thousands of times that number. The remains lay where they fell, to be swept away unrecognised with the mountains of debris from the fire or to be buried in cellars that were never excavated. Those who died of their burns, exposure and starvation in the cruel winter that followed the fire are recorded in the parish registers. But those who died in the fire itself left no record of their passing. There's no memorial to them, but modern London is built on their bones and ashes.

Gustav Milne

An excellent start. A very stimulating contribution. My only qualification for talking to you today lies in these archaeological trenches which you can see besides Pudding Lane as it was in 1979, in the shadow of the Monument. And those archaeological trenches which you can see are right next to the site where the infamous bake house was, and we had the pleasure of excavating the site right next door to the bake house over a cold winter in 1979/80. And that's what you see going on in that slide, and that got me interested in the Great Fire, from, as Meriel was saying earlier, something that we think we know about, so I then, as the first speaker did, started to read Pepys' diary, Evelyn's diary, Edward Waterhouse's account, Thomas Vincent's account, a Calendar of State Papers for 1666-1667 and the October sessions of the Old Bailey, the Parliamentary inquiry into the fire and so on and so forth. And as a result of that, and I set all that out in my book, and if you look at all of those things, as has been said before, we realise somebody decided we lost 13,200 houses, they counted 87 parish churches destroyed, six consecrated chapels, the Guildhall, Custom House, 52 company halls, two million pounds worth of printed paper, books and paper, £1500 worth of wine, tobacco, sugar, plums etc, so we have a big list of what was lost. So they managed to count all the books, wine, plums, churches etc that were destroyed, but apparently they were unable to count the number of people who died, unless we believe that it was this, between four and eight.

What was the cost in human lives? Now the parish clerks, their hall had also been destroyed, so they don't have any account of burials in the City for the two weeks commencing 29 August, which is hardly surprising as they were out of business. The previous weeks were recorded and when they did start publishing their figures again for the week commencing 25 September, this shows 266 people had died. But this can't be three weeks fatalities. It's very low for London. And if we look at the fatalities recorded for the whole of the year of 1666, there's still no category for the deaths caused specifically by the fire, although it does include 43 killed by several accidents and ten found dead in streets and fields. Now the old parish clerks, quite good at counting people, they counted 1198 people who died in the plague in 1666 and 68,596 who suffered the awful fate of the plague or whatever it was in 1665, so they were quite good at counting bodies or at least burial returns. And having read all those accounts of Thomas Vincent, Edward Waterhouse, Pepys, people who were actually there at the time, and having read the London Gazette number 85, the equivalent of the Metro, which is a contemporary account of

the fire, a newspaper, you would think if there were hundreds of people dying someone might have noticed it. And the incredible thing is all these personal views are all written by different people from different standpoints, so they're not like a newspaper which might want to minimise the public trauma of lots of people dying, but personal accounts and personal diaries. Nobody says, my God, we lost 20, 100 people, whole families have been wiped out. And when they looked at the cost of the fire, and even when in the October sessions at the Old Bailey, when the cause of the fire, and poor old Robert Hubert, who confessed to starting it, nobody charges him with multiple murder or genocide. Nobody seems to be aware that hundreds of people died. That's the documentary evidence.

The fire itself. This is not like the bombing of Hiroshima or something which is an act just like that. The fire takes a while, although it's several days, it does take a while to burn. It goes, yes it gets bigger and bigger and yes it's awful and gradually it takes up the whole time, but that's by Tuesday. It starts on Saturday night. In other words, it might be moving fast, but people do have time to flee. And if you look at the famous picture by the unidentified Dutch artist, people are fleeing. Look at them. That's what sensible people do when there is a fire. You don't hang around. You do flee. There you see the people eastwards, away from the smoke and flames, which are blowing westwards. The heat, if you've ever been anywhere near a fire, you can't hang around. The fire actually forces you away. I've had the pleasure of being in a fire, and you can't go towards it, as it were, you quite naturally flee, and that's what these people are doing, poor or rich. And the Londoners who owned a cart could hire it out for £5 to £10, £20 or £30, depending on who you were with your plates, pianos or whatever you're trying to get away. Every boat on the river was full to the gunnels with everything they possibly could and everybody is moving in the opposite direction to the fire. Can you see one person there who's hanging around waiting to see if the fire's going to go out? I can't.

We do have this, perhaps in our mind we think back to the Blitz and we think, I know, people sheltering from the Blitz and we have all the remembrances of tube stations where people found a safe haven and put their heads down while the Blitz was going on. And we also remember the case of St Paul's as the iconic building which survives the Blitz. Nothing can destroy St Paul's. It will be safe for all time, sort of stuff. Winston Churchill's dictate that at all costs St Paul's must be saved. Now the St Paul's in 1666 for example – churches were stone buildings, we've heard quite correctly, the majority of buildings were in flammable timber buildings. Where would you go? Where would the concept of the tube station be for those who go and shelter in safety in 1666? Would you shelter in St Paul's? It's supposed to have a large crypt and there is a sort of thought that people might have rushed into the crypt of St Paul's to save themselves and ultimately died, but the majority of church crypts in the 17th century would be full of coffins and not a very nice place and they don't have any electricity obviously, so they're very dark, very wet, well very damp and full of coffins and I don't think that is the sort of place you would want to shelter in, so there are no real safe havens. So I can't see any reason why anyone would want to do anything but run. If they were sheltering in the crypts

of St Paul's which were used by the stationers to store a lot of their printed books and papers, it was okay for storage of inert objects, but I don't think anyone would have wanted to shelter there. But even if they did, St Paul's was being rebuilt so it was covered in scaffolding, which is wooden in the 17th century, and the fire would have got up the scaffolding and into the roof. But even then, even if they were sheltering in St Paul's or somewhere similar, it does take quite a while for a roof to catch fire and burn, and they had time to get out.

Here in July 1984 you see the roof of the south transept of York Minster ablaze. That's a fireman with a power hose, and that's a flame, and that's the roof, the medieval timber roof of York Minster, ablaze. The fire stayed in the roof for two to three hours before the roof finally collapsed, which is time to get out if you are sheltering somewhere. And there's York Minster the day after, having lost its roof and its rose window. Yes the glass from the roof melted, yes the lead on the roof melted, the timbers burned, but the rest of the building is OK. And you'll notice that awful view of London after the fire, the shells of the buildings still survive, and if you look top centre St Paul's does survive, although the roof did crash down into the crypt of St Faiths, a lot of the walls still survive. The timber buildings have all gone and the roofs of the stone and brick buildings have all been ripped out and the whole thing is blackened and in an awful state. Here for example is the roof of a church which caught fire, St Mary at Hill. There's the roof all gone, but amazingly the rest of the building is okay, even if the roof burns down. Even the tassels on the pulpit are still there. So yes, they are burned, but if you were sheltering in there, you might just have survived, but I wouldn't recommend it.

As archaeologists, the Museum of London team have excavated many of the cellars of these Great Fire buildings, as you can see here, and sometimes they are just modestly charred, but found no evidence for any bodies in any of those. And even if you consider in the Second World War for example, supposing you did find somewhere to shelter, supposing you picked a nice stone church like the medieval version of St Brides. Here is a church burning down in the great fire storm of December 29 1940, which did leave a bit of a mess. The heat was certainly bad enough, all the piers are practically falling down, the heat has expanded all the joints etc, but in the crypt, you'll be thrilled to know (and there you see the place shored up, and that was the fire storm, which was at least as hot as the Great Fire), the crypts underneath St Brides church, the bones which were actually being stored there still survived the fire storm of December 29 1940. Those are medieval bones, long bones and skulls, taken reburial in a charnel house, which actually survived the fire storm of December 29 1940. So in theory, if you had been lurking in the medieval crypt of St Brides you would have survived as well as those did.

So, although yes there may have been some buildings which did have those terrible epicentre type proportions where nothing was found, where all human bodies would have disappeared, but I think in the Great Fire of London in 1666, I think the reason why there were so few fatalities recorded (yes there may be problems with our data, yes there may have been bodies which were cremated on the spot and we've never found the ashes), the speed which the

fire gradually moved was I think sufficient for people to do *this* and that's flee. Where we have no record of any person or diary entry of whole families being wiped out, the reason why it's not mentioned in the October sessions of the Old Bailey, the reason why it's not mentioned in the London Gazette number 85 is because people did that – they ran, and who can blame them?

Questions and answers

Question 1: How well was the census taken in the 1660s as compared to today?

Answer: Neil Hanson: Well, I don't expect it to have been quite as fanatically accurate in 1673, particularly with the state of London at the time, as you would in the present day. I believe it was probably as accurate as they could make it at the time. It would have been a census, Gustav would probably know much more about this than me, but I think it would have been a census of occupied houses and a head count of the occupants of them, and there are always people who don't like to be included in a census for various nefarious reasons, but I think it would be a reasonable rule of thumb.

Vanessa (Chair): I think it's actually a house count rather than a head count. We're probably talking about the hearth tax or the City survey of burnt houses. But your point that the number of houses standing empty is a strong argument for there being an awful lot of people who ought to have been there who weren't.

Gustav Milne: Yes, I think on that point it's worth remembering that according to the official figures (and are they counting houses, are they counting taxes, are they counting heads?) what is interesting is that 13,200 houses are recorded as having been destroyed, but by the end of about 1675 or something only 9000 houses had been built, so there is a distinct discrepancy between those buildings that were destroyed and those buildings that were considered worth rebuilding. I don't think that actually means 4000 people died without trace, I think that probably meant that 4000 households emigrated, as you say, to other parts of England, London or the New World. But it is interesting that the composition of London's population changed quite dramatically before and after the Great Fire, which would confuse censuses no end.

Question 2: A question for Neil – when you mentioned about these houses, 3500 remained empty, I was just wondering who'd built them? It would have been the freeholders, and it would have been the tenants who would have been missing I suppose?

Answer: Neil Hanson: Yes. I think a lot of building would have been speculative then as it is now. Builders would have moved in and built houses in the hope that they would be able to sell or let them. The previous landowners would re-erect properties on those places, many of which would

have been let, and if tenants weren't available, which they weren't, they would stand empty as they were recorded.

Question 3: If those 3500 tenants had gone missing, would the freeholders have had a record of them?

Answer: Neil Hanson: I don't believe they would. I mean what record would there be? I'm not trying to overstate the case. I think of those 100,000 missing Londoners, the vast majority had perfectly innocent explanations for where they were. They would have moved to other areas and simply not returned, and they set themselves up there and didn't come back, but just in defence of my argument (and if I don't do it, who will?) the speed of the fire, it's true, it took four days, but the speed of the fire was very variable. At times the fire would almost stall – it would come to a huge stone or brick building like the Bridewell and it would take a considerable time to burn through it. When it came to a district of slums and tenements it would rip through them at incredible speed; there would be a wall of flames 50 feet high, and at times it would be moving as fast as a man could run.

And the other thing about the fire which I think you have to remember is that there was an easterly gale blowing throughout this fire; and what was happening all the time, and you see the same phenomenon in bush fires in Australia today – its called crowning – and fires rip through the tops of gum trees in bush fires and they rip through the tops of tenements and sparks and brands get blown 50 or 100 yards ahead of the main fire front. So the problem is, yes, obviously anybody with half a brain who was conscious and able would want to flee the fire. But the problem is, you've got a wall of flame coming through from that side, you start to run that way, and there's a wall of flame ahead of you as well. The streets have all been dug up because people kept digging holes in them to find the water pipes in the hope of finding water to fight the fire, so the streets are all blocked with rubble, they're blocked with carts that have overturned, dead horses, there is complete panic everywhere. And I think in those situations, people would turn into streets they weren't familiar with. They might stray into an area they didn't know that well and that greatly increases the danger of them being trapped and unable to escape. As I said there are many areas where there were like warrens, there were mazes; it was very difficult for anyone who didn't know them to escape

Question 4: Turning to Gustav Milne and his archaeological excavations, how much of this Great Fire would have destroyed the Anglo-Saxon city of London?

Answer: Gustav Milne: Not at all.

Question: Nothing? It's not deep enough for that?

Answer: Gustav Milne: No, it didn't burn below the ground. The only time we have it archaeologically demonstrated, for example, the warehouse that we excavated in Pudding Lane, one of many sites that were burned in the Great

Fire, had some pitch barrels in it, and the burning pitch stained the layers immediately below the brick floor of the cellar. But otherwise the fire burns upwards and none of the underlying layers are usually affected by the Great Fire.

Neil Hanson: Fire does penetrate downwards though, through things like melting lead at St Paul's which will create a pathway for flames to follow. Things like spirits, oils and so on will find the lowest level as liquids always do, and burning liquids act no differently than liquid liquids. So there are ways that fire will penetrate down wherever it can find a way. I don't know if there were people sheltering in St Paul's or not, if they were, they were in serious trouble because by the time the roof of St Paul's ignited, St Paul's was virtually encircled by fire on all sides, so there would be no escape route by that time. And the six acres of lead of St Paul's, if you can imagine the scene as that melted, this great torrent of molten lead cascading from the rain spouts outside the walls and tumbling into the interior of St Paul's. Churches were refuges – they were used by people to store their materials against a fire, and when the fire was over, they would go and reclaim them. All the stationers had stacked up their papers and books in neat little racks with just enough space for air to get between them, and the inferno inside St Paul's was probably among the most intense fires anywhere in the Great Fire of London. If anybody was sheltering in St Paul's, then I don't believe they would have been able to escape, and I don't believe they would have survived.

Meriel Jeater: Could I add something about the St Paul's fire? Two bodies were recorded as being found in St Paul's. There was an old lady who William Taswell described as '*her limbs reduced to a coal*'. And then in Samuel Pepys' diary he records several months after the fire that an old man had gone back to St Paul's to retrieve a blanket and had become stifled. So those are the only two people known, I think, who died in St Paul's Cathedral.

Question 5: I wonder whether the vivid picture of the scene after the fire with people fleeing to the east and the fire advancing to the west is really taking some artistic license. It seems to me that the confusion, people running around in all directions; people to the east of the fire would have not so much to flee from because it was moving in the other direction. People to the west might want to escape I suppose the smoke and flames and obviously would but they'd hardly be running back through the fire, so maybe they'd be running around in all sorts of directions, and falling into cellars, and as you said, is this picture not really just artistic license rather than evidence that people fled in that direction?

Answer: Gustav Milne: I think it's a very fascinating painting which I hear a rumour, which we could discuss here I suppose, that it was actually painted by an unidentified Dutch artist. I have been told by hearsay that (we were at war with the Dutch at the time) this Dutch artist was actually over here painting military installations. What he was painting was the Tower of London and Tower Wharf. The English, not realising he was a spy said, 'Ooh, that's a nice painting, can you do the sun?' And he had already painted the military

installations of the Tower, and then the fire happened, so he then changed the painting and was overcome by the human drama involved and added the drama of the next three days onto it. I don't think he went down there with his easel and said, 'Ooh, look there's a fire, let's go and draw it'. I think he had already painted it, and done all the previous sketching on it, and then he was amazed to see what was happening and then added that to it.

Neil Hanson: There is another artist isn't there, who already got a painting of London to which he judiciously added a few flames so he could flog it for a decent price? Just on the eyewitnesses of the fire as well, it is worth remembering that probably only one person in fifty could read or write in that era, and I think none of the people living in Alsatia or in some of the slums and tenements were among the people who left witness statements of the fire. What we're getting from the fire are clergymen, middle class people, well educated and well connected people, who weren't in the districts that I'm talking about. They were viewing the fire as Pepys did by ascending his church tower, or having a look from his top window. They weren't in the heart of the fire where it burnt in the opening days of the fire.

Gustav Milne: Even in Pepys' diary he records how friends of his had their houses burnt, and so surely he would record it, and they lost all their servants and family, but he never mentions people dying in their hundreds, nor do parish priests, who should be looking after their parishioners, record their parishioners dying in their hundreds either.

Neil Hanson: The problem is I'm arguing that there is no physical evidence. I'm posing an almost impossible problem for Gustav because I'm saying there isn't any evidence so if he turns around and says there isn't any evidence, then I'd say, 'Yes, I've already told you that'. I'm really basing my argument on the balance of the probabilities every other great fire there had ever been the death toll has been counted in the hundreds and usually the thousands and I can't see a reason why the Great Fire of London would be any exception. And all these things about Pepys' neighbours and so on, that's beside the point. It's the districts alongside the river, where the fire rips through first and fastest, where I think the deaths would have occurred. Pepys was at a safe distance and obviously his neighbours had plenty of time to get away. I don't think everybody in those districts did.

Question 6: I believe that the Great fire wasn't the first fire in London, although there was nothing of that magnitude before. Are there any accounts before the Great Fire where deaths are listed?

Answer: Neil Hanson: There was one before the Great Fire of London that we know of. There was the Great fire of London that, you will excuse me I've forgotten the date.

Gustav Milne: There was a fire in 1632 which burnt the houses on the North side of London Bridge.

Neil Hanson: There was a particular catastrophic fire which broke out to the south of the bridge, and again forgive me, I've forgotten the year. That rages up to the south, and like I was saying earlier about crowning, debris was actually blown beyond the northern end of the bridge, and everybody living on the bridge at the time was in deep deep trouble, and a lot of people died. I remember the death toll from it, but people threw themselves into the river, many of the drowned. Meriel might know, but I'm afraid I don't.

Meriel Jeater: If I might add to the Medieval thing, the fire was in 1212, and what happened was, obviously the people living on London Bridge died, but also the people that tried to cross over the bridge to go and help the fire died, and apparently it was 3000, but our Medieval curator who talked to me about this a while ago thinks that that is an exaggeration but it's quite possible that it was 3000.

Question 7: Could the fire be a happy release for prisoners in the prisons because surely they would have opened them up to let them go?

Answer: Neil Hanson: Yes, there were records of prisoners being transferred. All the jails had burnt basically, and there are records of prisoners being transferred from one jail to another who didn't actually make it to their destination. I think it would be a great opportunity for escape. And I would hope that again they would have all been released or escaped, because if not, that would be a particularly horrible way to go.

Gustav Milne: I don't know about prisoners in jails, but I concur, I hope they would have been allowed out.

Question 8: There are records of some near escapes I think aren't there? Pepys rather graphically describes the poor cat with all its fur burnt off hiding up a tree I seem to remember. If there was that kind of injury or assault then presumably there are other people and animals who didn't make it, who were completely burnt?

Answer: Neil Hanson: Evelyn does talk about the smell of burnt flesh doesn't he as he makes his first walk through the ruins a couple of days after the fire?

Gustav Milne: Yes, the term he actually uses is '*poor creatures*', and one doesn't actually know if he is referring to horses or humans.

Neil Hanson: I think it would be very hard, certainly for a 17th-century person to identify one from the other.

Gustav Milne: I think it has to be said that, on the one hand I think that the figure of four/six/eight does seem low given the problems of escaping from the fire, but I think, had it been hundreds, someone would have recorded it, it would have been noticed.

Question 9: I'm just wondering about this figure of four/six/eight. How much do we know about who those people were? It seems like the Farriner's maid might have been one of them and obviously these two from St Paul's cathedral possibly. Who are the others, do we know them?

Answer: Neil Hanson: There was one off Fleet Street wasn't there? An old man whose son, I've forgotten the story of it, but his father was left behind or refused to go with him and died. He is number four. The woman found at St Paul's was just curled up on the outside of St Paul's in that fighter's posture that burnt bodies go in to. Those are the ones that give us that total.

Question 10: I find it interesting when you talk about the people who live down by the river. They would have been in very crowded situations, and there would have been a lot of sick people, a lot of young people, a lot of elderly, a lot of lame, and you were talking about the narrow roads, the heat of the fire, the wind, and also most people in fire are consumed by the fumes, not the heat. Well, there's been a lot of talk about the heat; I think there would have been a lot more people who died who weren't of recognisable state maybe.

Answer: Neil Hanson: Certainly when I was thinking about how to describe the fire, I remembered a film I'd seen, I'm sure many of you have seen it, a slow motion film of the first atomic bomb explosion, and the way that this building begins to heat up. It's in very slow time lapse, so you can see the building beginning to stream with smoke and getting hotter and hotter, wisps of smoke just becoming a torrent of smoke and suddenly boom, the atomic bomb is upon it. It's a ridiculous comparison to make to the Fire of London, but you do find that same description. Every side facing the fire would have streamed in that way. The pitch and any inflammable surface would have begun to stream with smoke before the wall of flame even reached it. People couldn't stand within 200 yards. Gustav is absolutely right; you could not stand within 200 yards of the fires at the height of the Fire of London. So, as the wall of flames swept through, yes it would have been held up by the Bridewell, it would have been held up by stone buildings, but when it found profitable territory to move on, it could move at terrifying speed; everything was so baked by the drought, and so pre-heated by the heat of the fires that as soon as the flames touched them they would just explode into flame like that.

Question 11: I do like the old stories about if it hadn't have been on the Sunday night when the fire had broken out or the early hours of Sunday morning, then the Fire of London might never have taken place, because the porters on Billingsgate putting it out. And I've also liked the one; more people have died by jumping off the Monument than died in the fire. But I suspect the truth lies somewhere between what you both say. There were more than seven or eight people killed, but I do have difficulty with hundreds possibly thousands being killed.

Answer: Neil Hanson: There's a famous quote from the Lord Mayor isn't there who arrived to see the fire when it was only burning in the bakery, and announced in a very dismissive way that a single woman could extinguish it using only the precious bodily fluids contained within her, and went back to bed. 13,200 houses later the fire was finally extinguished. It's a red herring, but may I throw it in here anyway. Among my clients wearing my other hat as a ghost-writer, are a number of SAS men, and I was talking to them, so perhaps we could come back to this later in later discussion about conspiracies. I was talking to one of them about the book I was working on and he sat and thought about it for a moment and he said, 'Didn't it ever strike you as curious that the fire happened to break out in a bakery where the ovens provide an excuse for the blaze, it happened to be at the time when the water engine that supplied the city was out of order, when an easterly gale was blowing to drive it right across London, it broke out in the most combustible district?' and he finished up by saying that if the SAS had been tasked with destroying London they wouldn't have changed a thing. That's your conspiracy theory if you like.

Question 12: You were saying about people fleeing. I've seen the video of the Bradford fire which was absolutely frightening, and the speed in which the whole thing spread, going from nothing to an absolutely huge conflagration in a matter of minutes. I didn't agree with all of what Neil said, but certainly when you say that people can flee a fire – no they often can't. The lady over the back said about smoke as well; smoke is a huge factor in fires.

Answer: Gustav Milne: Yes, I fully accept that, and all I can say is that in the bake house where it started, all but one were able to flee from that. And presumably the first thing you do when you flee from the fire is make a lot of noise, so I think people were already fleeing from the first moment it began, before they were trapped by fire, smoke etc. I have to say that I'm sure there were more unfortunate people who died than we have a documentary record for. I'm not trying to say documentary record would be absolute; I'm just surprised that none of the independent accounts, all written separate from each other, discrete accounts, none of them mention a large loss of life.